1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
AW32 Gond AW32
Hill Maria
Bison Horn Maria

and see the bulk of the Council's funds, including their own contributions, spent on the open and advanced tracts of the district where the villagers must be placated for political reasons. More will be said on this point later in this Note, in dealing with the Garchiroli zamindaris.

The dancing at Surjagarh stands out in memory as faster and livelier than any other dancing seen on this tour. The drums too were different, great double membrane drums of short sections of *semur* (*bombax malabaricum*) trunks, up to 2 ft. 6 in. or 3 ft. in diameter. The *Gazetteer* well describes the typical Maria dance :—

'The favourite dance is a peculiar rippling step forwards, with the foot dragged, not very graceful when done by a single individual, but looking quite different when done in unison by a great circle of dancers singing a *re-la, re-la*, chorus to which the step keeps time. In some villages where the headman is an enthusiast for the pastime a trained band performs weird and wonderful step dances to the sound of the drum. At a big dance the trained band occupies the inner ring round the fire, while the common folk, men and maids, in separate rings move round in great circles in opposite ways. All are dressed for the occasion in their best, bearing in their hands weird ornaments of wicker work, with garlands of flowers on their necks, and, in their hair, feather ornaments humorously or coquettishly placed. Seen in the red glow of a huge log fire, glinting on the shining beads and barbaric ornaments of the dancers, with the throb of the drums, and the beat of many feet moving in unison to the wild music of the voices in chorus, a Maria dance is a spectacle not easily forgotten, but lingers as a characteristic scene when other details have faded from the memory.'[1]

That would well describe that wild night at Surjagarh, when the dancers, their spirits enlivened by several earthen pots of *mahua* liquor, kept up their dancing nearly till dawn. It had been a long and tiring day, and I retired early, the last thing seen from my tent before I closed the flap to shut out the blaze of the many log fires, the dust and the tramp of hundreds of feet, being our now nearly nude Local Board Member, well warmed by liquor and congenial surroundings, leading a ring of dancers and gravely demonstrating the right steps.

Next morning after an early breakfast we climbed with many of the night's dancers up to the keep of the old fort that crowns the Surjagarh hills, 1,273 feet above the forests at their base, the ascent being over what the *Gazetteer*[2] truly calls a noble cliff of black ferruginous mica schist.

'The ascent at first is by a narrow rift in the mountain, whose sides rise vertically on either hand 600 feet in height, and then the path winds round the face of the cliff in natural steps formed by the weathering of the schist. The whole ascent has been carefully fortified by a series of stone breastworks, here thrown across the path, there perched on an overhanging ledge of rock, and if properly defended would be impracticable for troops without means of shelling. Within the keep on the summit there used to be a small tank which

[1] *Chanda District Gazetteer* (Allahabad, 1909), pp. 99-100.
[2] I'p. 428-9.

1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
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712 has now disappeared. The gates of the fort are lying on the top, and there is a stone platform, on which are images of horses and elephants sacred to the presiding deity, Thakur Deo. Previous to the Gond conquest Surjagarh was a noted Mana fortress, and about the end of the 17th century was occupied by two famous chieftains, Sādho Vuria and Mula Vuria, who rebelled against the Chanda king, Ram Shah, and, secure in their strong fortresses, harried the low lands with impunity. At length Ram Shah granted the tract to a relative named Kokshah, who after some years of desultory warfare stormed the hill and put the insurgent leaders to the sword. Kokshah then made Surjagarh his citadel, and under its shadow his descendants, the present Ahiri family, have extended their possession, east and west, and south and north, until nearly 3,000 miles of country own them masters. The scenery of these hills is very wild, and the black glittering mass of Surjagarh, streaked here and there with patches of bright green and red, stands out grandly against the sky. The upper cliffs have a beautiful shrub, with dark green leaves and clusters of lovely blue flowers.'

There were still 38,650 Manas in Chanda district in 1931, and Thakur Deo on the summit of Surjagarh remains their tutelary deity. Also named after them is the fortress of Manikgarh in the Rajura taluq of Adilabad district. Russell and Hiralal[1] speak of them as a Dravidian caste of cultivators and labourers, possibly an offshoot of the Gonds, and associated in the popular mind with Gonds and Gowaris. They are now completely Hinduized, and have generally adopted Maratha customs. The Thakur Deo platform on the Surjagarh summit had a wealth of clay images, mostly horses, in type precisely similar to the horse images associated with Aiyyenar in South India.

137 If you stand on the summit, in whatever direction you look, north, south, east or west, all the Sironcha and Garchiroli tahsils and the Abujhmar Mountains of Bastar still seem to be one vast forest, with only occasional small yellow patches indicating village sites and cultivation. Speaking of the Chanda Marias' shifting cultivation 241 (*podu*) Lucie-Smith wrote in 1869[2]:—

'For the vast wilderness east of the Wyngunga it is the very best that could be devised. By it, year by year, more and more land is cleared of forest and made ready for the plough, and thus every Maria village has around it a very much larger area of open ground than would be the case if the plough only were used. No one who has passed through these great wastes, shut in by lofty trees and dense masses of bamboo, and seeing, sometimes for days, not a trace of human habitation, can fail to rejoice at the work fire and axe are doing. It is of course important to prevent the destruction of forest containing valuable timber, and to arrange for reserves of jungle wood, grass and bamboos near the cultivated tracts, but, this done, *dahi* cultivation should be encouraged. It would be idle to speculate upon the changes in temperature and in rainfall the clearance of the forests would entail, for even if the population increase to the full, and coal mines, railways and river navigation bring all the prosperity we hope they will, yet in all human probability the youngest teak seedling now springing into life will have grown old and withered to dust before the eastern wilderness shall have sensibly decreased.'

[1] Vol IV, p. 178, *et seq.*
[2] Loc. cit. para. 232.